

# New Jersey's Public School Buildings

## *A Brief Field Guide*

### Introduction

Schools have existed in New Jersey since the early years of the colonial period, and the buildings that have housed them have been many. To better appreciate them, it will help to classify them according to their various types. This article is too brief to treat private, parochial, special-purpose, or experimental schools, or higher education buildings, but, given that large caveat, here is a brief guide to the earliest and most recognizable types of public school buildings.

### One-Room Schools

Of the schoolhouses in New Jersey from before 1750, we know little more than that such buildings existed. None of these buildings have survived, so that if any will be found in the future, it will be as archaeological traces in the ground. The town of Newark, for example, opened a school in 1677, and



*The Brainerd Schoolhouse in Mount Holly. Built in 1759, it is the oldest of the small number of early primary schools that still stand in New Jersey.*

other towns followed. Some of the earliest schools may have been conducted in houses or meetinghouses, because with only a few students and one teacher it was not always necessary to have a building that would be used exclusively for the school. Our most common mental image of the early school is that of the one-room schoolhouse. But while all of the earliest school buildings had but one room, during the last two hundred years they evolved considerably.



*Lyons Farm Schoolhouse, ca.1782-84. Longer in proportion than the Brainerd school, its entrance was placed in the gable end, foreshadowing a change that would become standard in the 19th century.*

The earliest schoolhouses that still stand in New Jersey date from the second half of the 18th century. The oldest survivor is the Brainerd schoolhouse (HABS NJ-100) in Mount Holly, built in 1759. It is a well-constructed, brick building, qualities that set it apart from most of its vanished predecessors.

Other 18th-century schools that survive include the Lyons Farm schoolhouse (1782-84; HABS NJ-3) of Newark, built of stone, and the brick Quaker schoolhouse (1792) in Burlington City. The organizing of schools and hiring of teachers was becoming increasingly widespread in New Jersey during the generation before the Revolution, and during the first generation after independence one-room schools became a commonplace throughout the New Jersey landscape for the first time. Schooling in southern New Jersey was also aided by a Quaker-led reform: the building of houses for schoolmasters to live in. Such houses were meant to make the master an established member of the community and take the itinerancy out of teaching. It was expected that by this means that better-educated teachers could be recruited. One schoolmaster's house (ca.1781) still stands at Stony Brook in Princeton Township, Mercer County. Nearly all of the schools of this period have vanished, but references to them can sometimes be found in 19th-century local histories.

The shape of early schoolhouses took various forms, but the general course of their evolution until after the Civil War paralleled the evolution of meetinghouses to churches. The Mount Holly schoolhouse of 1759 features a facade 24 feet long with a center door, and side walls of 20 feet. This arrangement, putting the entry in the middle of the long side, was like that of many meetinghouses of



*The shape of the early schoolhouse was an important consideration, and at least 25 octagon schoolhouses were built in New Jersey between 1800 and 1851. This one, the Fairview Schoolhouse in Knowlton Township, Warren County, is the only survivor still bearing witness to this brief vogue (HABS photo).*



*The Carpenter Street School in Woodbury, built in 1840, was the first segregated school in New Jersey built for African Americans. It also represents the one-room school before the influence of education reformers began to be felt.*

the colonial period. In contrast, the Lyons Farm schoolhouse is about 31 feet long and 21 feet wide — about the same footprint as many small 18th-century meetinghouses — but the entrance is in the gable end. There is some evidence that many favored a square plan for schoolhouses, based on descriptions that survive. Such schools ranged from 16x16 feet to 24x24 feet, and 20x20 feet may have been the most common size. The original part of the old Franklin School in Metuchen (ca.1807, expanded ca.1840; HABS NJ-226) originally featured a square, 20x20-foot schoolroom. One Quaker-led reform popular in Hunterdon County was the octagon schoolhouse, a reaction to the shortcomings of existing school buildings. Octagon schoolhouses were better lighted because they had no dark corners and the windows were, on average, closer to the student desks, and they were better heated because the heating stove was moved from along a side wall to the middle of the room and bench seating was arranged concentrically around it. At least 25 octagon schools were built in New Jersey before 1850, but only one survives, the Fairplay School (1835) in Knowlton Township, Warren County. Segregated schools for African American children began to appear, starting with the Carpenter Street School (1840) in Woodbury, and they grew in number as the century progressed, especially in southern and central New Jersey.



*The Old Academy, Basking Ridge, built 1809. Academies were the first secondary schools, before the emergence of high schools during the latter half of the 19th century. A few academies later grew into major educational institutions that still provide private secondary education.*

## The Reformers

The first American book on schoolhouse design was published in Boston in 1832, and New Englanders for the next generation led a national movement for education reform. In 1846, New Jersey appointed its first state school superintendent (today the Commissioner of Education). In 1848, Henry Barnard published *School Architecture*, which provided useful designs of model schoolhouses. From this period on, schools that adhered to the new reforms would be built with rectangular plans on raised foundations, and the classrooms would offer high ceilings and to the students individual “patent” desks arranged in columns and rows. Other authors followed Barnard’s lead, and the state superintendent encouraged local school committees to use the most appropriate designs. The South Branch Schoolhouse (1873), in Branchburg Township, Somerset County, is a well-preserved schoolhouse where this advice was followed. Such schools made their narrow, gable end their front side, sometimes with a front porch, and perhaps a datestone in the gable. These schoolhouses were rectangular but not square, with narrow facades and long side walls. The side walls featured multiple double-sash windows, individually framed at first, but from the 1870s on,

often set together as a bank of several sash windows beside one another in a single frame. Small belvideres sometimes crowned the roofs, with a school bell permitting a teacher to more effectively summon the students. Most surviving one-room schools were built after the Civil War, and in rural areas they continued to be the norm until the early 20th century. A book has even been written—*Chickaree in the Wall*—about Ocean County’s one-room schoolhouses. The Ocean Gate School (1914) in Ocean Gate Borough, is one of the last one-room schoolhouses built in New Jersey, and, housing a kindergarten class, it is perhaps the last one still in use for regular classroom instruction.

## Multiple-Room Elementary Schools

As long as there have been education commissioners, they have complained that there are too many school districts in New Jersey. Such complaints can be found in their annual reports at least as early as the 1860s, when New Jersey had more than 1400 school districts (there are more than 600 today) and when the first attempts to persuade districts to merge were made. Such a consolidation was originally known as a “union” district, and sometimes these districts were able to build larger schools. As small towns grew in population, they too could afford larger schools,



*The Flocktown schoolhouse, Washington Township (Morris County), built about 1868. This building dates from the heyday of rural one-room schools, and represents the type of 19th-century schoolhouse probably most familiar to the general public.*



*The Higbee Street School, Trenton, built 1857. Schools in New Jersey's cities began to grow dramatically in size before the Civil War. This school captures the beginning of that trend, during the latter years of the Greek Revival style's popularity.*

and architects came forward with designs. Two-room and three-room schools were designed as one-story buildings. The district no.98 school (1872, enlarged in 1884) in Stockton Borough, Hunterdon County, is a three-room school in a situation where the merger of two neighboring districts allowed for a larger building than either of the districts alone could have afforded. Four-room schools could also be of a single story, but they were more likely to be of two stories. Eight-room schools began to make their appearance in the larger towns after the Civil War, as a two-story school with double-loaded corridors, four classrooms to a floor. A single hipped roof over all of the classrooms often served to unify the design.

## Secondary Education before the High School

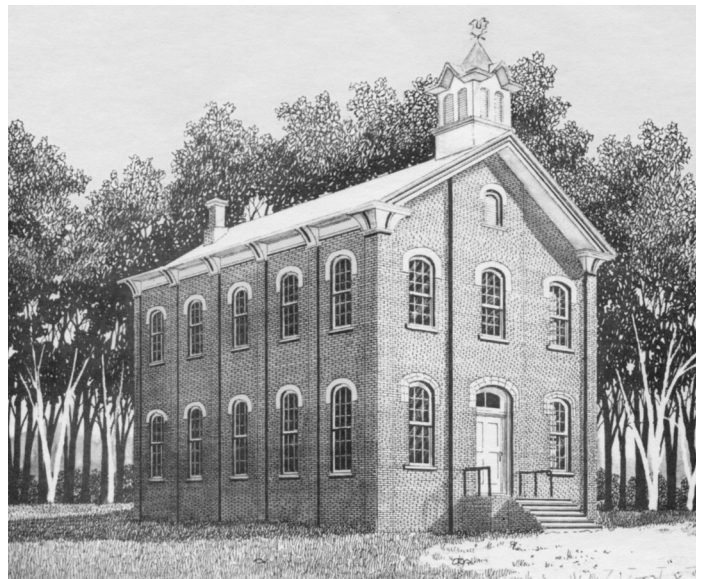
The first arrangements for secondary education — academies — sprang up in several towns before the Revolutionary War, and in many more towns afterward. Sometimes, as at the Amwell Academy (1811) in Ringoes, these were simply large houses. In other cases such as at the Old Academy (1809) in Basking Ridge, some effort was made toward the development of a recognizable building type. In Talbot Hall (1814) at the Lawrenceville School, a 3-story, stone building, we are reminded that in these academies

we are looking at the beginnings of both public and private secondary education in New Jersey.

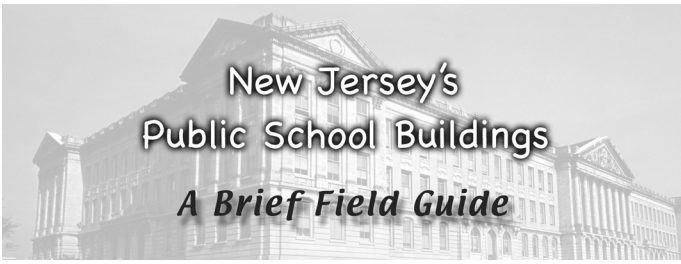
The academies taught Latin and Greek, English, algebra, geometry, geography, penmanship, and sometimes history and science to students who sometimes did, but more often did not, attend college afterward. Some academies were coeducational from the beginning, but many were intended for boys only. In time, a parallel institution emerged — the young ladies' seminary — which adopted some of the curriculum of the academies, but also emphasized music, literature, and drawing classes. Sometimes these institutions were housed in large, fashionable residences; others were housed in buildings that resembled the early academies for boys.

## 19th-Century Schools in Cities and Towns

In the 19th century, railroads produced a landscape that was dominated by densely-packed industrial cities and sizeable towns. With few exceptions, the first suburbs were railroad suburbs. On the other hand, railroads did little, if anything, to increase the rural farm population. By 1928, for example, when automobiles began to eclipse railroads, Mercer County had a farm population estimated at only 6,000, out of a total population of

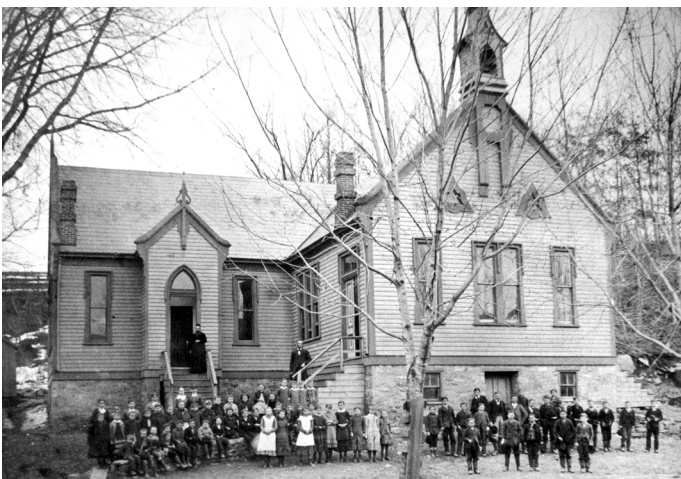


*The Church Street School, in the Town of Nutley, built 1875. After the Civil War, multiple-room, two-story schools began to proliferate in New Jersey's small towns.*



about 170,000. The effect that these population realities had on the design and construction of schools was enormous. The largest school buildings were built in the fastest-growing cities, and a middle range of schools, smaller than the urban schools but far larger than rural ones, began to emerge in the towns. And from the second quarter of the 19th century through the second quarter of the 20th, educational leadership in New Jersey would come chiefly from the cities. Newark, the state's largest city, became its largest school district, with the largest number of schools and many of its largest and finest.

After the Civil War, two laws reshaped public education in New Jersey. Laws of 1867 and 1871 ushered in public education in the modern sense: school would be tuition-free but attendance would be compulsory for children between 5 and 16 years old, and the schools would follow the 180-day, September-to-June calendar that has been standard ever since, replacing the old, 3-month winter-term and summer-term calendars of the past. School districts could for the first time tax their citizens to



*The District no.98 Consolidated School, Stockton Borough, built 1872-73. This architect-designed school resulted from an early merger of two school districts; this photo shows its original appearance before it was enlarged in 1884.*

pay for school construction, and several years later would also be empowered to sell bonds, thereby spreading the financial burden of new school construction over a period of years.

The result of this new environment of needs and opportunities was a new generation of schools frankly declared to be "public." Public School No. 1 in Perth Amboy (1871) is a representative example. Because the 1871 act was passed during the heyday of the Second Empire style, the finest of the new schools built in the immediate aftermath of its passage bore its trappings. Public School No.2 in Paterson (1871) is another survivor. These



*The Church Street School, Long Branch, built 1889, exemplifies two decades of schools built in New Jersey's cities in the wake of the 1867 and 1871 school laws that together ushered in the modern era of "public" education. They also served as examples for the schools built in the state's suburbs and small towns following the 1894 school consolidation act.*

schools were architect-designed, of masonry construction and two stories under a mansard roof, featuring a main entrance in a projecting porch or pavilion in front of the main line of the facade. In the 1880s and '90s, mansard roofs gave way to hipped roofs in many schools and the Second Empire style gave way to features from the Romanesque Revival, Richardsonian Romanesque, and other styles. Gas lighting supplemented natural illumination during this period, hardwood floors became standard, and coal-fired steam boilers powered central heating systems. Public School No. 20 (ca.1890) in Paterson and the George Washington School (1899) in New Brunswick are representative urban examples from the end of the

century. The Mercer Street School (1894) in Hightstown is a good, small-town example.

During the early 20th century, schools in cities and large towns increasingly became major civic institutions. Influenced by college and university architecture, they typically featured Classical Revival or Collegiate Gothic designs, often with a central pavilion flanked by symmetrical wings. The pavilions, however, projected only slightly, if at all, unlike the bold projections of their predecessors. This was made possible by integrating stair towers within double-loaded hallways of classrooms, rather than isolating stairwells in projecting towers. Elementary schools in this period popularized separate entrances for boys and girls, who spent their recess in separate areas of the playground.

### Schools between the World Wars

Catching up with improvements to curriculum and electrical, plumbing, and heating advances, the new schools of this period were complex, modern buildings. They typically featured graded classrooms up through the eighth grade. School “systems” gradually emerged in the sense that the several schools in a community were administered



*The Vineland High School, designed by the Newark architectural firm of Guilbert & Betelle and completed in 1927, represents the popularity of the Tudor Gothic Revival in 20th century public schools.*



*Dickinson High School, Jersey City, built 1906-11. Designed by Jersey City architect John T. Rowland, Dickinson is one of the most outstanding examples of the Classical Revival style in a public school building.*

under a centralized leadership headed by a superintendent and backed by a school board. Sizes of buildings usually followed a hierarchy, from smallest (elementary schools) to largest (high schools), with junior high schools (today’s “middle” schools) somewhere in between. Through the 1920s, design trends of the prewar period were strengthened and reinforced, and as the buildings became ever larger and more complex, they came increasingly to be designed by architectural firms that specialized in school construction. High schools in this period sometimes featured colossal porticoes in one or another of the classical orders, as in the Trenton Central High School (1930). They featured gymnasiums, auditoriums, and cafeterias in wings that extended toward the rear of the buildings, and they added “manual” (vocational) training, business courses, and physical education. Beginning in the latter half of the 1920s, some architects began to include elements of the new Art Deco and Art Moderne styles. Paterson’s Public School No.5 (1939) is a good example in the Art Deco style. In the 1930s and early ‘40s, Trenton built a series of schools in this fashion.

### The Baby Boom and Beyond

School construction surged during the Baby Boom years (1946-1964) and for a decade afterward, which with New Jersey’s rapid suburbanization, brought another generation of



*After 1930 Trenton changed school architects. The result was a decade of schools like this one, Junior High Number 2, built in 1940 in the Art Deco style.*

schools that were very different from their predecessors. Many of these schools have reached 50 years of age, or will soon. They arrived in the era of the International Style, and adhered to many of its dictums: a disdain for natural materials, historical detail, or symbolic ornament; combined with a frank expression of structural elements, simple massing, stark rectangularity, fluorescent lighting, and abundant use of glass and aluminum mullions. The Classical Revival and the Collegiate Gothic styles, which dominated schools in the 1920s, were nowhere to be seen, and the Art Deco style faded fast. These schools also featured a single story under a flat roof. Where a school was built with a second story, it usually covered only a very small fraction of the first story, as if it were a vestige. High schools in rural areas such as Hunterdon County were “regionalized,” but whether in rural or suburban settings, new schools were set on large tracts of acreage that provided ample space for multiple athletic fields, lawns, parking lots for the cars of faculty, staff, and for school buses. To a higher degree than ever before, schools were no longer within effective walking distance for their students.

## The Present Era

The forces that fueled these changes carried their momentum through the ‘70s and ‘80s, but the era of the Baby Boom schools has ended. The Post-Modern architectural movement has left its stamp on the newest schools, whose designs have broken ranks with the postwar schools. In plan and layout, many similarities remain, but the computer revolution during the past thirty years is bringing profound changes, as new classrooms become “wired” and even “wireless” as never before and as more “classroom media” factors in instruction. The Abbott decisions of the New Jersey Supreme Court have launched a surge of new school construction in New Jersey’s poorest districts, while low interest rates in the past ten years have prompted suburban districts to add new schools and large additions to existing schools. High schools in many places have become the largest buildings of any kind in their municipalities, with average square footages per pupil never before seen. In addition, the rise of “community education” as a grass-roots movement since the 1970s has brought a new constituency — tuition-paying adults — into the schools in large numbers. With evening classes, weekend programs, and summer schools, high schools as a result have become more heavily used than ever before. What all of this will mean for historic preservation in the future is not yet clear. ❖

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*The Luis Munoz Marin School in Newark, built in 1959, represents the International Style that was the dominant stylistic influence on schools in the Baby Boom era.*